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In the fight for Quebec's nationalist votes, the Bloc QuÃ©bécois is pulling ahead

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Body

Last year, when the majority of Bloc QuÃ©bécois MPs had quit in protest, it would have been hard to imagine the sovereigntist party getting much attention during the 2019 election. But that was then and this is now.

Now, after what looked like a long slide into irrelevance, the Bloc seems to be rising from the ashes. Leader Yves-FranÃ§ois Blanchet has performed well and polls show the party is ahead of the Conservatives in Quebec, behind only the Liberals, and in first place among francophone voters.

The Bloc QuÃ©bécois has gotten a boost from the province's nationalist CAQ government, which has issued a list of demands only the Bloc has fully endorsed. It's also the only major party that supports Quebec's controversial secularism law.

A year ago, when Quebec elected its right-leaning CAQ government, it seemed the federal Conservatives stood to benefit. The Tories have appealed to nationalist voters by promising to meet some of Quebec Premier FranÃ§ois Legault's demands for more autonomy.

Bloc QuÃ©bécois Leader Yves-FranÃ§ois Blanchet argues a point with NDP Leader Jagmeet Singh in Monday's federal leaders debate.

But the Conservatives have struggled to sell leader Andrew Scheer's proposed national energy corridor, a non-starter in Quebec. And so it looks increasingly like the Bloc could be headed for a comeback - Blanchet is hoping to double his seat count from 10 to 20.

Sensing a threat, Liberal leader Justin Trudeau has attempted to paint the Bloc as a relic. "Unfortunately, you, Mr. Blanchet, as a sovereigntist, are only looking for opportunities to create fights between Quebec and the rest of Canada to advance your separatist agenda," Trudeau said during Monday's English-language debate, the first time many anglophone Canadians would have heard from Blanchet. "Unfortunately, that's not something that Canadians want."

Be that as it may, it seems this new incarnation of the Bloc QuÃ©bécois is still saying something many Quebecers want to hear.

Blanchet has tried to position the Bloc as a rejuvenated party with appeal not just for the old guard of Quebec separatists but for young, progressive voters as well. He boasts that 63 of his candidates for Quebec's 78 ridings have never held office.

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Martin Champoux, the candidate in Drummond, is one of those new faces, a former media personality now entering politics. His riding is a one-time Bloc stronghold between Montreal and Quebec City that went NDP in 2011. This time, it looks to be a tight race between the Liberals, Conservatives and Bloc Qu'Ã©bécois.

"I think most Quebecers are nationalist and that's something that's going to be important in their choice this year," Champoux said.

A political rookie, Champoux isn't well-known in his riding. Still, there's clearly renewed interest in the Bloc here. At a public market recently, a man approached Champoux to say he'll likely get his vote - he feels Blanchet has turned the party around. "The Bloc, it's the party that most defends the interests of Quebec," he said.

The Bloc's biggest hurdle is the sense that its moment has passed. The party vaulted into official Opposition status in 1993 and remained an important force in Parliament until 2011, when it was reduced to just four seats by the Orange Wave, which saw the NDP sweep 59 ridings under former leader Jack Layton.

Since then, the party has struggled to find its footing as interest in Quebec independence has waned. In February 2018, under former leader Martine Ouellet, seven of 10 Bloc MPs quit the caucus, citing dissatisfaction with Ouellet's unwavering focus on separation. They rejoined the party after she announced her resignation.

Blanchet, whose bid for the leadership went uncontested in January, is more of a pragmatist than Ouellet, with no immediate plans to start pushing for a referendum, said Guy Lachapelle, a political scientist at Concordia University in Montreal.

Bloc Qu'Ã©bécois Leader Yves-FranÃ§ois Blanchet and his wife Nancy Deziel arrive at the federal leaders debate on Monday.

Under Blanchet, a former Parti Qu'Ã©bécois cabinet minister and political pundit, the Bloc has openly aligned itself with Legault's CAQ government. The connection marks an important shift for a party traditionally tied to the sovereigntist Parti Qu'Ã©bécois - though the CAQ is decidedly nationalist, it's not calling for independence.

"The Bloc Qu'Ã©bécois is sovereigntist, clearly, at the speed and the manner that Quebecers want," Blanchet said during last week's French-language debate. "In the interim, don't be surprised by a proximity between the Bloc Qu'Ã©bécois and the current Quebec government. Why? Because these are two entities that are resolutely nationalist."

The result is a party touting a blend of progressive and nationalist policies: the Bloc wants more action on climate change, but is also calling for Quebec to have more control over immigration. It also supports Bill 21, which bans religious symbols for some public sector employees, including teachers, judges and police officers.

Still, there are many who won't be convinced the party still has a raison d'Ãªtre. "It hasn't worked for 30 years. It won't work better today," said Susan Costigan, a retiree from Trois-RiviÃ¨res, another battleground riding. "I've retired. There are parties that should also retire."

The Conservatives have also tried to turn a CAQ government to their advantage, hoping to add to their 11 seats. "When we speak with people who voted for the CAQ, more than a majority have the tendency to align with the Conservative Party," Alain Rayes, the party's Quebec lieutenant, recently told reporters (<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/montreal/bloc-quebecois-debate-and-coalition-avenir-quebec-federal-election-1.5303087>).

The Tories have adopted some of the CAQ's key demands, including a commitment to a single income tax return for Quebec and a promise not to challenge Bill 21 in court.

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These commitments appear in a list of demands Legault issued to the federal leaders last month. But the Bloc is the only party to embrace all of the CAQ's demands, including allowing Quebec to give a language and values test to immigrants.

Marie-Jos  e Gu  rette, one of the Tories' Quebec City candidates, said the Conservatives will do more for Quebecers than the Bloc ever can. "The only way for Quebecers to have a stronger voice in Ottawa is to vote for the Conservative Party, because the Bloc will never be in power," she said.

How the Bloc Quebecois hopes to cash in on sovereigntists' collective guilt(
<https://nationalpost.com/news/politics/election-2019/how-the-bloc-quebecois-hopes-to-cash-in-on-sovereigntists-collective-guilt>)

Rise of Canada separatist leader poses electoral challenge for PM Trudeau(
<https://nationalpost.com/pm/elections-pmn/rise-of-canada-separatist-leader-poses-electoral-challenge-for-pm-trudeau-2>)

NP View: The first French debate shows Canada sliding back into some dangerous habits(
<https://nationalpost.com/news/politics/election-2019/np-view-the-first-french-debate-shows-canada-sliding-back-into-some-dangerous-habits>)

Still, a major obstacle is Scheer's proposal to build a national energy corridor that would move oil and gas across the country. "There's a strong opposition to a pipeline crossing Quebec," Lachapelle said. "I think it's very basic."

Targeting the Conservative leader as a key opponent, Blanchet attacked Scheer for this proposal during Monday's debate. He also demanded to know Scheer's personal views on abortion during last week's debate in French. Scheer has now said publicly that he is pro-life, a position not shared by many of his Quebec candidates.

Not long ago, commentators were predicting a very different campaign for the Conservatives in Quebec. "The most realistic scenario seems to be a Conservative wave unlike anything Quebec has seen since the days of Brian Mulroney," conservative pundit   ric Duhaime wrote in July(
<https://www.lapresse.ca/debats/opinions/201907/05/01-5232855-elections-federales-qui-sera-le-champion-du-nationalisme-quebecois-.php>).

But it's a mistake to assume that people will vote one way federally because of how they voted provincially, Lachapelle said. "I think it's clear that there's a division of interests here between different parties."

The Liberals are hoping to pick up a number of the same seats the Bloc is targeting, to make gains on the 40 ridings they hold currently. It's the NDP that stands to lose from all this, of course - none of the party's 14 seats is safe.

In Berthier-Maskinong  , west of Trois-Rivi  res, Ruth Ellen Brosseau is one of few New Democrats with a decent chance. She's popular, having moved to the riding after her surprise election in 2011. "I still think that the NDP is not dead," she said. "I don't want to think **doom** and gloom, because I don't think we're down and out."

But if she keeps her seat, it may be in spite of her party, not because of it. Brosseau's main challenger is the president of the Bloc Qu  b  cois, Yves Perron, who will try to convince voters that the NDP had its moment in Quebec and never delivered. "Jack Layton was a very sympathetic guy. I think he touched the heart of Quebecers, and they wanted to try something else," he said. "But now we've seen what it is. And it's nothing much."

Perron is hoping those voters will see something new in the Bloc this time around. "We can't force people to vote for us," he said. "We have to give them the taste for it, the desire."

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